FOUNDATIONS FOR ADULT LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT POLICY

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Ministerial Statement

Minister of Advanced Education
The Honourable John Gogo

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1. MR. SPEAKER, THIS GOVERNMENT HAS ALWAYS RECOGNIZED THAT ALBERTA'S GREATEST RESOURCE IS ITS PEOPLE. THIS IS REFLECTED IN EDUCATIONAL POLICIES WHICH ARE INNOVATIVE AND RESPONSIVE AND IN EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS WHICH MEET THE CHANGING NEEDS OF ALBERTANS.

2. THIS YEAR, THE PROVINCIAL GOVERNMENT IS COMMITTING OVER $90 MILLION FOR ADULT LITERACY THROUGH THE DEPARTMENTS OF ADVANCED EDUCATION, EDUCATION AND CAREER DEVELOPMENT AND EMPLOYMENT. OF THE TOTAL, $50 MILLION IS BEING USED TO PROVIDE ADULT BASIC EDUCATION, ACADEMIC UPGRADING AND LITERACY PROGRAMS AND $40 MILLION IS BEING USED TO SUPPORT ADULT LEARNERS.

3. THE KEY TO MEETING THE CHALLENGES OF GLOBAL ECONOMIC COMPETITION AND CHANGING DEMOGRAPHICS IS FOUND IN THE COMPREHENSIVENESS OF OUR EDUCATIONAL POLICIES. IN PARTICULAR, WE MUST BE SURE THAT WE PROVIDE PROGRAMS WHICH MEET THE SPECIAL NEEDS OF ADULTS WITH LOW BASIC SKILLS.

4. THIS IS ESSENTIAL IF WE ARE TO DEVELOP ALBERTA'S HUMAN RESOURCE POTENTIAL TO THE FULLEST. THE 1990 STATISTICS CANADA LITERACY SURVEY SHOWED THAT WHILE ALBERTA RANKS FIRST IN THE COUNTRY IN NUMERACY AND SECOND IN READING SKILLS, THERE ARE STILL A SIGNIFICANT NUMBER OF ALBERTANS WHOSE LIMITED BASIC SKILLS PUT THEMSELVES, THEIR FAMILIES AND THEIR EMPLOYERS AT RISK.

5. MR. SPEAKER, UNESCO HAS ISSUED A WORLD-WIDE CALL TO ACTION BY DESIGNATING THE 1990S AS THE DECADE OF LITERACY AND 1990 AS INTERNATIONAL LITERACY YEAR. IN ALBERTA, WE ARE SEEING AN AWAKENING OF PUBLIC INTEREST IN AN ISSUE WHICH HAS BEEN A MAJOR FOCUS OF THIS GOVERNMENT'S EDUCATIONAL EFFORTS FOR TWENTY FIVE YEARS.

6. INTERNATIONAL LITERACY YEAR HAS FOCUSED ATTENTION ON THE TREMENDOUS WORK BEING DONE IN ALBERTA TO TACKLE THE LITERACY ISSUE. IT HAS SEEN A COMING TOGETHER OF INDIVIDUALS, THE COMMUNITY, EDUCATORS AND GOVERNMENT, BOTH TO DELIVER PROGRAMS AND TO SHARE IDEAS.

7. I WAS HONOURED TO BE INVITED TO LEAD THE CANADIAN DELEGATION TO THE 42ND SESSION OF THE UNESCO / IBE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON EDUCATION IN GENEVA, SWITZERLAND, AND TO ADDRESS THE PLENARY SESSION ON CANADIAN PERSPECTIVES ON LITERACY.

8. MR. SPEAKER, IT IS A GREAT PLEASURE FOR ME, DURING INTERNATIONAL LITERACY YEAR, TO BE ABLE TO RELEASE THE GOVERNMENT'S NEW LITERACY POLICY FOR PUBLIC DISCUSSION.

9. THE FOUNDATIONS FOR ADULT LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT POLICY IS THE WORK OF AN INTERDEPARTMENTAL COMMITTEE MADE UP OF REPRESENTATIVES OF 15 GOVERNMENT DEPARTMENTS AND AGENCIES. BRIEFS RECEIVED FROM OVER 70 INDIVIDUALS, ASSOCIATIONS, INSTITUTIONS AND DEPARTMENTS FORMED THE BASIS OF THE POLICY. ON BEHALF OF THE GOVERNMENT OF ALBERTA I WOULD LIKE TO EXPRESS MY THANKS TO EVERYONE WHO PARTICIPATED IN THE POLICY DEVELOPMENT PROCESS.

NEW LITERACY POLICY

10. THE FOUNDATIONS FOR ADULT LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT POLICY WILL GUIDE OUR FUTURE DECISION MAKING. IT PROVIDES CLEAR AND CONSISTENT DIRECTION FOR MEETING THE LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT NEEDS OF INDIVIDUAL ADULTS WITH LOW BASIC SKILLS, AND FOR MEETING SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC DEMANDS FOR INFORMED AND INVOLVED CITIZENS.

11. THE POLICY PROVIDES A FRAMEWORK UNDER WHICH THE CURRENT BASIC SKILLS PROGRAMS AND SERVICES PROVIDED BY SEVERAL GOVERNMENT DEPARTMENTS CAN BE REVIEWED AND COORDINATED. IT ALSO ADDRESSES THE NEED TO COORDINATE PROGRAMMING INITIATIVES BY GOVERNMENT, POST-SECONDARY INSTITUTIONS, COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS, BUSINESS AND LABOUR.

KEY ASSUMPTIONS

12. MR. SPEAKER, THE NEW POLICY RECOGNIZES THAT WE NEED A BROADER UNDERSTANDING OF THE MEANING OF THE WORD LITERACY.

13. STRICTLY SPEAKING, LITERACY MEANS THE ABILITY TO READ AND WRITE. BUT IN TODAY'S FAST CHANGING WORLD, LITERACY IS A DYNAMIC CONCEPT.

14. LITERACY CHANGES WITH SOCIETAL CHANGES, ECONOMIC DEMANDS, AND EDUCATIONAL EXPECTATIONS. IT IS NO LONGER A ONE-TIME EVENT. INSTEAD, LITERACY MUST BE SEEN AS A CONTINUUM.

THREE KEY PRINCIPLES

15. MR. SPEAKER, THE DRAFT LITERACY POLICY RESTS ON THREE KEY PRINCIPLES. FIRST, IT RECOGNIZES AND ACCOMMODATES THE CULTURAL, SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC ENVIRONMENTS OF INDIVIDUALS AS THEY PURSUE THE ACQUISITION OF SKILLS TO FUNCTION MORE EFFECTIVELY IN THEIR WORKPLACES, COMMUNITIES AND EVERYDAY LIVES.

16. SECOND, THE POLICY RECOGNIZES THAT THE LEARNING NEEDS OF INDIVIDUALS CHANGE THROUGHOUT THEIR LIVES IN RESPONSE TO PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT OR SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC FACTORS.

17. AND THIRD, THE POLICY RECOGNIZES THAT LEARNING IS A VOLUNTARY AND RESPONSIBLE ACTION. THOSE INDIVIDUALS WHO ARE WILLING TO MAKE THE COMMITMENT NECESSARY TO IMPROVE THEIR BASIC SKILLS AND ARE PREPARED TO ACT REQUIRE REASONABLE ACCESS TO PROGRAMS, COUNSELLING AND APPROPRIATE FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE.

18. IN VIEW OF THIS FOCUS, THE POLICY STATES THAT INDIVIDUALS, COMMUNITIES, THE VOLUNTARY AND PRIVATE SECTORS AND GOVERNMENT ALL SHARE RESPONSIBILITY FOR ADULT DEVELOPMENT.

19. THE FOUNDATION FOR ADULT LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT POLICY COMMITS GOVERNMENT TO PROVIDING OPPORTUNITIES THAT WILL GIVE ADULT LEARNERS, IN NEED OF TRAINING, THE ACCESS TO A LEARNING ENVIRONMENT THEY NEED TO CHANGE AND IMPROVE THEIR OWN LIVES. AS WELL, IT ADDRESSES THE ISSUE OF STUDENT SUPPORT.

20. PUBLIC AWARENESS IS AN ESSENTIAL COMPONENT OF THE NEW POLICY. WE WILL PROVIDE INFORMATION TO EXPLAIN THE CONCEPT UNDERLYING THE NEW POLICY AND THE PROGRAMS AND SERVICES AVAILABLE FOR ADULT LEARNERS.

21. MR. SPEAKER, I AM PLEASED TODAY TO BE ABLE TO SUBMIT THIS POLICY FOR PUBLIC COMMENT. IT IS ESSENTIAL THAT THE GROUPS AND INDIVIDUALS MOST AFFECTED HAVE A CHANCE TO REVIEW THE DOCUMENT BEFORE IT IS ADOPTED. I AM ASKING PEOPLE TO RESPOND BY MARCH 1, 1991.

22. IN CLOSING, THE DEVELOPMENT OF A NEW LITERACY POLICY HAS BEEN A PRIMARY FOCUS OF MY MINISTRY. I WANT TO THANK ALL MEMBERS FOR THEIR SUPPORT OF ACTIVITIES THROUGHOUT INTERNATIONAL LITERACY YEAR AND TO REMIND THEM THAT WHILE WE HAVE MADE GREAT STRIDES, THERE IS STILL MUCH TO BE DONE.

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Introduction

Since its formation in 1905, Alberta has made education a key priority. Through the years the province has consistently distinguished itself by implementing innovative and responsive educational policies, structures, and programs to meet the changing needs of its people.

Despite these efforts, the relentless progress of technology, the demands of global economic competition, and the inevitability of social change have made it difficult for more and more Albertans to maintain the quality of their lifestyles. This province understands that the key to meeting the challenges of global economic competition and to sustaining the quality of life is found the comprehensiveness of its educational policies. The measure of a responsible educational system is the adequacy of policies concerning the provision of programs to meet the special needs of adults with low basic skills.

The purpose of the "Foundations for Adult Learning and Development Policy" is to set out a framework for reviewing, developing, coordinating, and providing programs and services offered by the Government of Alberta for adult learners with limited basic skills. Recognizing that learning has become a lifelong responsibility of all members of society, the need to provide educational opportunities for those with poor basic skills is central to the province's commitment to the fullest development of Alberta's human potential.

As a companion to such government policies as the "Language Education Policy for Alberta" and "Caring and Responsibility: A Statement of Social Policy for Alberta", this policy will guide future decision making by providing consistent direction for meeting the learning and development needs of individual adults with low basic skills, and for meeting social and economic demands for informed and participative citizens.

This policy is a commitment that learning opportunities will be provided especially for those whose learning needs are greatest.

Rationale

Albertans at Risk

In Alberta many adults are disadvantaged in their work and in their everyday lives by deficiencies in basic skills. However, very few of these adults are totally unskilled or illiterate. Many are employed citizens who can read and write, but not well enough to cope with day to day demands.

Statistics Canada reported in September, 1990, that the basic skills of 11% of Alberta's adult population are too limited to allow them to deal with the majority of written material encountered in everyday life. Another 17% have skills that only permit them to carry out simple reading tasks provided they are in familiar contexts and that the reading materials are clearly laid out.

The people of Alberta are an essential resource. Those with limited basic skills put themselves, their families, and their employers at some risk.

- Children of parents with low basic skills are less likely to finish school or to see the value of education. The cycle of "intergenerational illiteracy" once established can rarely be broken through schooling alone.

- Adults with poor basic skills directly affect the lives of others:
  - They drive vehicles but are unable to read the road signs;
  - They operate production equipment but can't read the safety manuals;
  - They handle dangerous chemicals but can't read the warning labels;
  - They give medicine to their children but are unable to read the dosage directions on the label.

Adults with poor basic skills often lack initiative or self-confidence. Usually their circumstances are aggravated by poverty, ill health, physical and psychological distress, legal troubles and extended histories of social welfare dependency. Poor basic skills do not cause these conditions, but too frequently they exist together, and together bring about a spiral of personal discouragement and decline.

The growing economic, human and social costs of these deficiencies are unacceptable in a modern society.

The provision of educational programs and services that establish a foundation of basic skills is the best hope many of these adults have for economic independence, for personal stability, and for a chance to become contributing members of Alberta society.

Coordination

The Government of Alberta has been providing substantial funding to adult basic skills programs and services since the end of the Second World War. Per capita expenditures in this area have been among the highest in the country. This policy will help to ensure appropriate direction, fiscal accountability, and program effectiveness of the activities undertaken with this support. It provides a framework to formally review and coordinate the current basic skills programs and services provided by several government departments and to address the coordination of programming initiatives by government, post-secondary institutions, community organizations, business and labour.

Foundations for Adult Learning and Development: A Conceptual Framework

The development of foundational learning and development skills is an educational process in which adults acquire the basic skills to achieve their personal goals, improve their social and personal lives, achieve economic independence, and assume greater responsibility for themselves, their families and their communities. This process involves the acquisition of basic skills in three areas.*

Communication skills, at the minimum, include English language proficiency, literacy, numeracy and general civic, scientific and cultural knowledge, values and attitudes.

Living skills embrace knowledge of health, sanitation, nutrition, family planning, the environment, management of the family economy, and creation and maintenance of a home.

Production skills encompass all forms of activity directed towards making a living or producing goods and services, at whatever level of economic sophistication.

(*Adapted from the UNESCO definition for adult basic education.)

Policy Statements

To meet the demand for informed and participating citizens, and for a well-trained and productive workforce, the Government of Alberta is committed to providing educational opportunities for Albertans to improve their basic skills. To help achieve this goal, the government has developed the "Foundations for Adult Learning and Development Policy". This policy encourages Albertans to assess their needs and accept personal responsibility for taking advantage of programs and services to develop their basic skills.

Access to Programs Policy

The Government of Alberta will provide adult Albertans, who so desire, reasonable and equitable access to programs that establish a foundation of basic skills.

Assumptions

Competency in basic skills is essential for people to be productive in the workforce and to be responsible in family and community life.

The Government of Alberta recognizes the value of education and learning throughout life.

Support for the province's extensive system of post-secondary institutions, vocational colleges, and community based organizations will be maintained.

Provision of Programs Policy

The Government of Alberta will provide appropriate programs to meet the basic skills needs of adult learners.

Assumptions

Foundational programs for the development of basic skills must help individuals achieve their goals and help meet government priorities for the development of Alberta's human resources.

Learners have individual and changing needs.

Foundational adult development programs should accommodate learners prepared to improve their basic skills by helping them to acquire the skills to function more effectively in their workplaces, in their communities, and in their everyday lives.

Programs must maximize the gains of learners with a minimum investment of learner time and public cost.

To the extent possible, government will maintain support for the extensive variety and levels of basic skills programs offered throughout the post-secondary system.

Student Support Services Policy

The Government of Alberta will facilitate the provision of student support services and will ensure that a reasonable level of financial support is provided to those otherwise unable to participate in adult learning and development programs because of financial barriers.

Assumptions

Government policies should support the choices and decisions of individuals concerning their foundational learning and development.

Government policies must recognize and accommodate the fact that adult learners may have to overcome significant personal barriers before they can participate in education and training programs.

Lack of financial resources should not stand in the way of an adult's attempt to upgrade basic skills.

Government coordination of student support services is essential.

Cooperation and Partnership Policy

The Government of Alberta will encourage cooperation, collaboration, and the formation of partnerships between and among the public, private and voluntary sectors in the delivery of foundational programs for adult development.

Assumptions

Addressing the needs of adult learners with low basic skills requires a comprehensive approach and the commitment and participation of all sectors of society.

Business, industry, labour, and government are important partners in identifying needs in the workforce and in creating learning opportunities for under-skilled workers.

The mobilization of available resources and the development of linkages through cooperative action are important partnership strategies.

The development, delivery, and evaluation of foundational programs for adult development is a shared responsibility involving government departments, post-secondary institutions, school authorities, community consortia, further education councils, proprietary training institutions, community-based agencies, professional associations, business, and labour.

Public Awareness Policy

The Government of Alberta will promote the Foundations for Adult Learning and Development concept and provide information about the availability of adult basic skills programs and services.

Assumptions

Public information about issues and programs related to low levels of basic skills helps to address the problem by encouraging potential students and by stimulating public understanding, involvement, and support.

Adult learners desiring to improve their basic skills may need assistance identifying their own learning needs and should be provided with information about available programs and services.

Principles

Based on the need for adults to acquire basic skills to communicate, to improve the quality of their lives, and to contribute to and to increase economic productivity, the Foundations for Adult Learning and Development Policy Statements were designed around the following three principles.

Individual Learner Context

The value and integrity of individual learners in the context of their cultural, social and economic environments must be understood and respected.

To understand the learning needs of individuals and the complications brought on by deficiencies in basic skills, it is essential to recognize and accommodate the context in which these circumstances are found. Financial insecurity, poor health, family obligations, and physical and psychological abuse are conditions that confound attempts to enhance basic skills. Without an understanding of this principle, the efforts of decision makers and program developers will be ineffective.

Changing Learning Needs

The learning and development needs of individuals will change throughout their lives.

Personal lifestyles must constantly adapt to many internal and external influences imposed by maturity or social and economic change. As these changes occur, individuals often see the need for new learning. Skills judged to be adequate at one stage in life, may be distressingly inadequate to cope with changed responsibilities at a later stage. A skilled tradesman may experience the need to upgrade writing skills to meet the demands of a promotion. A high school dropout may discover the need to upgrade academic qualifications after experiencing the frustration of continued under-employment.

Shared Responsibility

The provision of learning opportunities and the acquisition of new skills required to meet the needs of adults is a shared responsibility of individuals, communities, government, business, and labour.

Learning is a voluntary and responsible action. Those individuals who are willing to make the commitment necessary to improve their basic skills and are prepared to act, require reasonable access to programs, professional counselling, and appropriate financial assistance. Clearly articulated education and training partnerships between and among individuals and the voluntary and private sectors and government are an essential characteristic of a learning and caring society.

A Discussion of Definition

The word "literacy" has come to represent all the foundational skills necessary to achieve the goal of being productive, responsible citizens. Consequently, it is clearly impossible to establish an absolute and unqualified definition of literacy that satisfies the demands of all of these expectations. In Alberta we recognize that the basic skills necessary for adult learning and development must be distinguished into the categories of communication skills, living skills, and production skills. Literacy, the ability to read and write, is but one aspect of basic skills. Taken together these basic skills make up the foundations for adult learning and development.

Making meaningful discussion and concerted action more difficult is the fact that the field of adult literacy is confounded by confused and contradictory definitions of terms. The result is that too often, without consideration of an individual's skills and circumstances, a person is labelled an "illiterate" when his/her level of schooling is below some arbitrary standard. Almost all universal measurements of "illiteracy" based on school completion or on tests of literacy competence serve only to over-simplify complex issues by ignoring differences in culture, social expectations, and economic demands. The problem of "illiteracy" cannot be solved by deciding how many illiterates there are and forcing them all into classrooms until they can meet some minimum standard for reading and writing. Since very few Albertans are totally without reading and writing skills, it is a misnomer and disservice to label adults with low basic skills as "illiterates". The further distinction between "absolute illiterates" and "functional illiterates" does nothing to resolve the definitional confusion nor to redress personal insult. The cause of adult literacy would be well served if we were to drop the word "illiterate" from our vocabularies altogether.

Foundations for Adult Learning and Development is a flexible, dynamic concept that changes in light of social values, economic demands, educational expectations, and the needs of the individual. A grade eight education might have led a 1940's worker to expect secure employment and social acceptance. However, that same worker in the 1990's is labelled a functional illiterate and is highly susceptible to being laid off his/her job.

A Continuum of Skills

The extent of an individual's skill development is largely determined by perceived needs. A person in changed circumstances generally tends to acquire the new skills needed to cope or to suffer the consequences. Thus, any ability may be described as being made up of a continuum of incrementally complex skills. In the case of literacy, the skill continuum might range from the total inability to read or write through foundational skills and ultimately on to the ability to process highly complex information. The abilities of all people can be plotted at some point along this literacy skill continuum. By establishing benchmark performance competencies along the skills continuum, it is possible to identify a person's current skill development in relation to that individual's skill needs. One advantage of the skills continuum concept is that it makes arbitrary standards of literacy irrelevant and encourages the understanding and consideration of an individual's skills in relation to that individual's needs.

Lifelong learning implies a constant assessment of current skills against the skill demands of future ambitions. What is required is the willingness of individuals to act to eliminate the gap between their current skills and the skills they need, and for the provision of appropriate learning opportunities to make that possible.

Role of the Province

In addressing the foundational learning and development needs of adult Albertans with limited basic skills, the role of the Government of Alberta is:

- To promote a lifelong learning society in which Albertans are assured a high standard of education and training opportunities;
- To foster individual self-reliance and to provide positive learning opportunities for individuals to enable them to achieve their personal goals, to take responsibility for their actions, and to be contributing members of Alberta society;
- To ensure that Albertans have access to quality learning opportunities, training, and educational programs and services;
- To consult with stakeholder groups, program providers, and community representatives concerning the systematic, effective and responsive delivery of foundational programs for adult development;
- To encourage providers of adult learning and development programs to consider the reduction and elimination of institutional and situational barriers to participation in foundational programs of adult learning and development;
- To encourage collaboration among providers of foundational programs for adults with low basic skills to develop a curriculum model that can accommodate the specific needs of individual learners;

- To encourage providers of foundational adult learning and development programs to consider the specific needs of linguistic and cultural minorities, people of aboriginal descent, and handicapped and disabled Albertans in the design and delivery of programs;

- To coordinate the provision of student support and financing;

- To encourage educational providers to engage in collaborative actions and partnership arrangements with communities, labour unions, businesses, and government to bring together all available resources in addressing the limited basic skills of adults;

- To encourage program providers to recruit, train and use community volunteers for appropriate roles in the provision of foundational adult learning and development opportunities;

- To heighten public awareness of adult literacy issues and to provide information about programs and services for adults seeking to improve their basic skills; and

- To encourage the use of plain language in the writing of announcements, brochures and public documents.

Conclusion

The "Foundations for Adult Learning and Development Policy" is a framework policy that aims to provide clear and consistent direction for meeting the learning and development needs of individuals with low basic skills and for meeting societal demands for informed and participating citizens. It establishes a context for developing new programs and services. It forms the basis for future planning and gives direction for taking action. It is an assurance that learning opportunities will be provided especially for those people with limited basic skills whose needs are greatest. Together with other social and educational policies of the government, it sets a background for the maintenance and development of specific program policies designed to meet the needs of adults for basic skills in an ever-changing economic and social environment.